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ABSTRACT

Child abuse and neglect (CA&N), as a social and psychological phenomenon, represents a major area of concern internationally. This study examined the prevalence and self-reported effects of CA&N in Iran through a descriptive investigation of high school students' experiences. A sample consisting of 2,240 high school students representing 5 geographical areas of Tehran completed the Child Abuse and Neglect Questionnaire and the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory. Preliminary analyses indicated that 24% of the sample was subjected to some form of physical abuse, while 34% reported past physical abuse experiences. Overall, 43% of the participants reported they had been battered at least once in their lives. The high rate of physical abuse was followed by emotional abuse (23%), neglect (15.5%), and sexual abuse (4.7%) in the sample. The results suggest that child abuse may be a significant social problem in Iran, but one that is not openly acknowledged as a function of the sociopolitical climate. (Author/JDM)

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# Child Abuse and Depression in Iranian Students: An Empirical Investigation

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Abstract

Child abuse and neglect (CA&N) as a social and psychological phenomenon, represents a major area of concern internationally. The purpose of the current study was to investigate the prevalence and self-reported effects of CA&N in Iran through a descriptive investigation of high school students' experiences. The sample consisted of 2240 high school students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, representing the 21 educational districts and 5 geographical areas of Tehran. Research measures included the Child Abuse and neglect Questionnaire and the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory. Preliminary analyses indicate that 24% of the sample was currently being subjected to some form of physical abuse, while 34% reported past physical abuse experiences. Overall, 43% of the participants reported they had been battered at least once in their lives. This high rate of physical abuse was followed by emotional abuse (23%), neglect (15.5%), and sexual abuse (4.7%) in our sample. The correlation of emotional abuse with the total BDI-SF score was small, but statistically significant ($r = .068$, $p < .05$, $N=2117$). Our results suggest that child abuse may be a significant social problem in Iran, but one that is not openly acknowledged as a function of the sociopolitical climate.

# Child Abuse and Depression in Iranian Students: An Empirical Investigation

## Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (CA&N) as a social and psychological phenomenon, represents a major area of concern in the United States and internationally. In the U.S. alone, the prevalence rate of CA&N has been estimated to be 12.9 per 1,000 children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000a). Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that approximately 40,000,000 children worldwide are victims of CA&N (World Heath Organization, 1999). Despite a multinational commitment to reduce the incidence and prevalence of CA&N through the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (American Psychological Association, 1991), for many countries, research into the extent and effect of CA&N continues to be neglected. Reasons suggested for this neglect include the presence of a sociopolitical and religious climate that inhibits open inquiry in this area.

One country in particular for which this seems to be a viable explanation, is Iran. With the exception of a few studies (e.g., Mohammad-Khani, 1999; Rashidyfar, 1997), inquiry with regard to CA&N in Iran has been relatively nonexistent. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to investigate the prevalence and self-reported effects of CA&N in Iran through a descriptive investigation of high school students' experiences.

## Method

Participants: The sample consisted of 2240 high school students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years. Of the sample, 52.5% were girls and 95% identified their religious affiliation as Muslim. The majority of the students (94%) were living at

home with both biological parents at the time of the study with the remaining students living with a single parent or in foster care. Thirty high schools, representing the 21 educational districts and 5 geographical areas of Tehran, provided access to student participants. Additionally, efforts were made to acquire a sample proportional to the general population in terms of gender, SES, culture, and religious affiliation. Classes within schools were randomly selected and the research instruments were administered in the group settings.

Measures: Research measures included the Child Abuse and Neglect Questionnaire (CANQ) and the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck & Beck, 1972). The CANQ, written in Persian, was developed by the first author to be used specifically with Iranian students. The CANQ consists of 15 demographic items and 18 items specifically investigating abuse-related experiences. Imbedded in the CANQ are items related to the following definitions of abuse:

Physical Abuse: Physical maltreatment or inflicting any physical harm including slapping, shoving, kicking, burning, biting, and flogging.

Emotional or Psychological Abuse: Causing any intensive psychological or emotional trauma through sever verbal threats, humiliation, age-inappropriate expectations, exposure to disguising scenes (e.g. parental physical fight) to the extend that jeopardizes the child's mental health and emotions.

Sexual Abuse: Any Sexual contact with the child for sexual gratification of the perpetrator, including molestation, assault with or without violence, any oral, anal or vaginal intercourse, rape, and incest.

Neglect: Hidden forms of physical and psychological maltreatment

including extreme lack of love and care, malnutrition, and lack of necessary medical care.

The Persian translation of the short form of the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-SF) has a history of use in clinical work in Iran, thus supporting its use in the current study.

## Results

Preliminary analyses indicate that 24% of the sample was currently being subjected to some form of physical abuse, while 34% reported past physical abuse experiences. Overall, 43% of the participants reported they had been battered at least once in their lives. Slapping was the most common reported type of battering (43%) and 23% of the sample reported at least one type of emotional abuse. Finally, 4.7% reported at least one incidence of being sexually abused and 15.5% reported being neglected.

Overall, 23% of reported abusers were identified as immediate family members, 31% as other relatives, 16% as acquaintances, and 31% as strangers. Neglect by biological parents was 23%. Report of neglect and sexual and emotional abuse was significantly higher for girls than boys ($t=96.74$, $p< .001$; $t=18.87$, $p<. 001$ respectively). However, there was no significant gender difference in reporting physical abuse. Students living with a single parent reported higher neglect than those in other living situations ($F=6.47$, $df=5, 2031$, $p< .001$). Report of physical abuse was significantly related to poverty as indicated by low income ($F=8.87$, $df=4, 2032$, $p<. 001$) and residency in the southern region of Tehran ($F=6.15$, $df=4, 2032$, $p<. 001$).

Finally, the total mean score on the BDI-SF was 7.65 with 41% of the sample scoring above the mean. The correlation of emotional abuse with the total

BDI-SF score was small, but statistically significant ($r = .068$, $p < .05$, $N = 2117$). Significant correlations were not found for the other types of abuse or neglect.

## Discussion

In our survey of CA&N and depression in Iranian high school students, the most reported type of abuse was physical abuse (43%). This compares favorably with Mohammad Khani (1999) and Rashydifar (1997) who reported a similar rate of approximately 50% for Iranian students. This high rate of physical abuse was followed by emotional abuse (23%), neglect (15.5%), and sexual abuse (4.7%) in our sample. Also supporting prior research (e.g., Mohammad Khani, 1999; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000b; Ludwig & Kornberg, 1992), there was a strong relationship in our data between physical abuse and socioeconomic status. Finally, the small correlation between emotional abuse and depression was a somewhat surprising result. Clearly, the statistical significance of that coefficient is a function of statistical power and the clinical or practical value of the observed relationship is questionable. It could be that the negative psychological impact of emotional abuse often observed in western research in this area has strong cultural underpinnings. If the relationship between abuse and depression observed in the current research holds under replication, future researchers will need to consider the cross-cultural and research design implications of this finding.

In summary, our results suggest that child abuse may be asignificant social problem in Iran, but one that is not openly acknowledged as a function of the sociopolitical climate. Until governmentally sanctioned epidemiological studies are undertaken in Iran to investigate the incidence and prevalence of CA&N, it is unlikely that it will act on its documented commitment to the 1989 United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child (American Psychological Association, 1991).

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